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Heraclio Bonilla

Religious Practices in the Andes and their Relevance to Political Struggle and Development

The Case of El Tío and Miners in Bolivia

For the native population in the Andes, the mountains are sacred places and central elements of a mythical historical identity, since the founding fathers, according to Inca legend, arose out of the land. In honor of this tradition, the mountains are objects of worship: one asks for their protection, while returning, through sacrifice, the wealth obtained from the earth. The mountains, moreover, are the place of the dead and of different gods and spirits that require special attention. In the mining centers, for example, there is an ambivalent figure, El Tío, both evil and good, residing in the dark caves deep below ground. These belief systems, reproduced over and over again in ritual acts, inform everyday practices of the Andean population and constitute part of its world view. They are the result of the conflictive combination of Spanish Catholicism and Indian cosmology during the modern period. Ignoring this tradition turned out to have considerable drawbacks for development agencies and the political parties that tried to organize miners. The religious culture of this mountain society was, and to a certain degree still is, an important source of class struggle and a basis for development politics.

Keywords: *Sacred mountains; religious belief systems; class struggle; development politics; Bolivia; Andes.*

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Preamble: "The Uncle"

In the deep, black holes of Bolivia's tin mines there has lived since time immemorial a chalky personage with mustache and large eyes, his mouth agape, nostrils blackened from cigarette smoke, his body covered with various adornments. He is seated on a throne, his hands extended to receive offerings, his knees bent and feet enclosed in rubber mining boots. He displays a large, erect penis, a reminder of his virility. The tunnels of the mines are his kingdom (Figure 1). He is the famous "devil," although no miner refers to him as *supay*, the Quechua term for devil, using instead the affectionate Spanish term for "uncle" (*tío*) often accompanied by various surnames (Urban and Sherzer 1991).

The Bolivian Tío brings harm, yet he also protects miners from the inevitable accidents of their trade. What is more, he generates prosperity, allowing the miners to discover rich veins of tin and silver. In order to prevent disasters and produce riches and protection, the Tío must be venerated through homage and offerings which Andeans have always made to give thanks to the Earth Mother, or *Pachamama* (Flores Galindo 1988). The offerings vary: on Tuesday and Friday, the miners offer coca leaves, hand-rolled cigarettes, and bottles of white rum to slake the Tío's thirst. Furthermore, each carnival Tuesday the miners perform *cha'alla* in the mine, soaking the earth around the Tío with *chicha*, rum, or beer, lacing his neck with confetti garlands, and placing food and drinks all around his throne. On the vespers of the first of August comes the toast of *k'araku*, a sacrificial offering of a llama or alpaca whose blood is splashed on the threshold and walls of the mine. At other times the *wilancha*, or blood sacrifice of a domesticated camelid, takes on a different form: "the miners take a live llama and place it in a mining cart with numerous sweets and other offerings impregnated with alcohol and kerosene, and push it in and light it as it enters the depths of the mine" (Fernández Juárez 2000, p 30). The sacrificed animal makes up part of the ceremonial banquet for the participants, and its remains are buried as part of the "payment" to the mine, and to the Tío. It is at carnival time that the Tío emerges from the mines, disguised as Lucifer in order to dance with other demons.

The Tío and the rituals surrounding him allude to Western traditions, but these have come to be profoundly altered as a consequence of long contact with Andean cultures. This metamorphosis may explain in part the odd familiarity with which the miners treat the Tío. Rites and offerings permit control over the forces of evil, repaying the earth and the subsoil in an act of reciprocity for the minerals taken from the mines, yet at the same time ending with the dangerous Tío included in "festive sociability" (Nash 1979).

It is worth remembering that the interior of the mine is a fundamentally masculine space; it includes only the Tío and the miners, all of them men (Bonilla 1974).Women are strictly forbidden from entering the mines, as their presence is thought an insult that would make the rich veins disappear. Such prohibition applies equally to work activities and ceremonies. Women who scavenge ore tailings, the so-called *palliris* (often miners' widows), must work outside the mines (Kruijt and Vellinga 1983). The Tío figure is not unique to the Bolivian mines of Potosí and Oruro, but rather is found in other forms throughout the mineral-rich districts of the central Andes. In Peru's Cerro de Pasco, Ticlio, Morococha, and Casapalca mines, one finds the *muqui*, a devilish figure who resembles the Tío. One must appease the *muqui* and seek his protection through rituals and offerings.

Nature in human form

What does the presence of these devils, "uncles," and *muquis* in the depths of Andean mines, with all their

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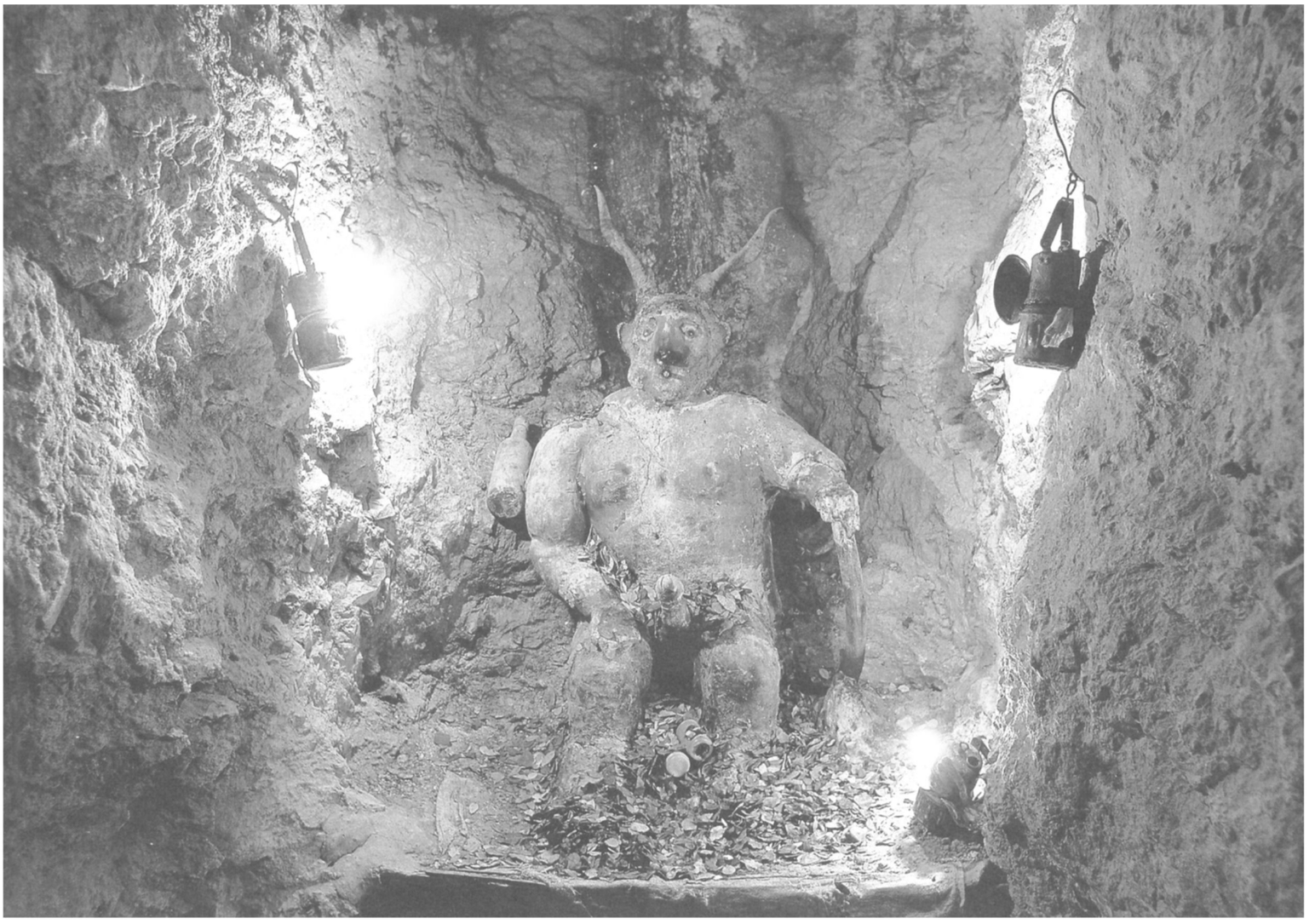

FIGURE 1 One of many *tíos* in a Potosí mine. According to Estenssoro Fuchs (2003, pp 105–110), Quechua lacks a true synonym for "devil," or "evil being." *Supay* initially meant "phantom," or "shade," ie the spirit of a dead person said to counsel the living so that they might find peace through proper deeds. Opposition to and diabolization of *supay* was the result of the politics of translation amid changing conditions of evangelization. (Photo by G.M. Azumendi/San Marcos)

attendant ceremonies and rites, mean? What are the implications for understanding the natural and social order of mountain societies? What are the relationships between the mythic and religious practices and the sometimes highly controversial politics of development? These questions and issues are treated here in several steps. (1) First, a key anthropological model is introduced for the study of these questions, along with basic notions of Andean conceptions of space which belong to the mythical-religious realm. (2) The next section explores the time dimension of this realm by summarizing selected origin myths and pointing to their relevance for understanding the relationship between the mountainous landscape and its human inhabitants. (3) The third section briefly summarizes the historical formation of this complex under Spanish domination from the 16th to the early 19th centuries. (4) This historical account leads to an analysis of the present situation and the intimate fusion of religion and politics during the last 25 years, in a country where mining constitutes one of the key sources of national income (Figure 2). (5) The final comments integrate the statements of a Peruvian thinker on the importance of mythology for a proper understanding of mass mobilization, political struggle, and development issues in the Andean context. Needless to say, these aims can only be realized by focusing on the main lines. Hence general patterns and arguments rather than individual facts are presented here.

A characteristic of pre-modern thinking is to spontaneously describe nature in terms of human analogies. In addressing the content and form of these analogies, the influential Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1973) postulates that they represent the invisible

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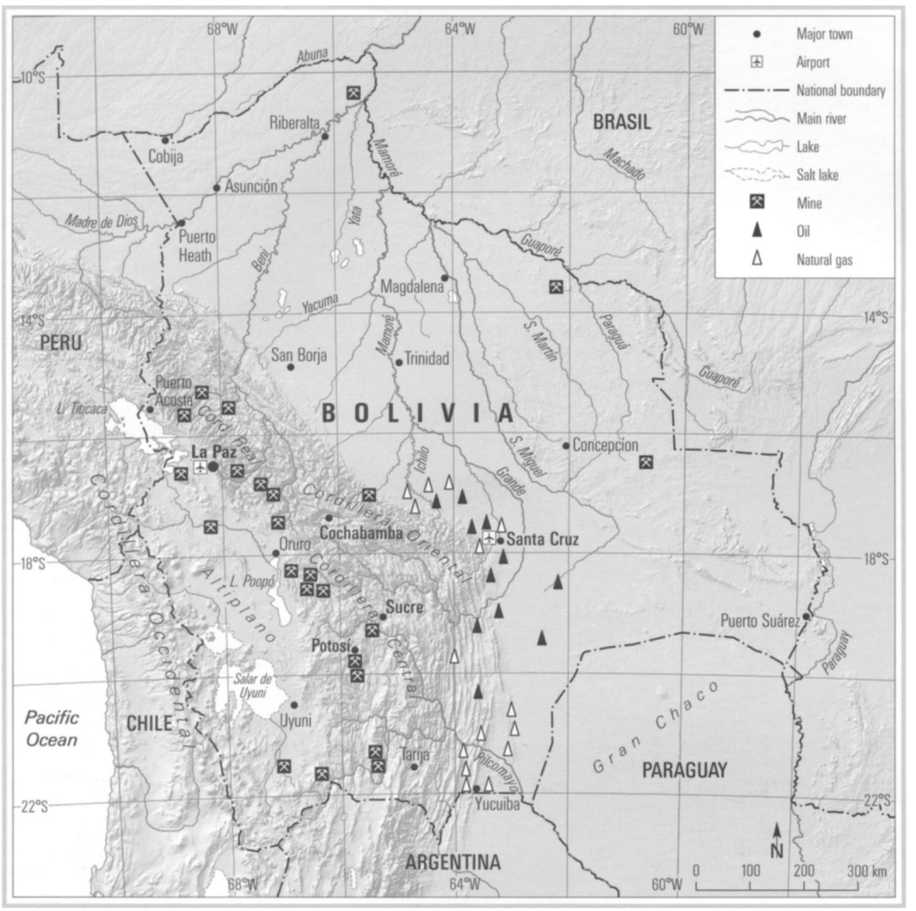

FIGURE 2 Predominance of the mining sector in Bolivia. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck, based on information from the author)

forces and realities of nature as "subjects," that is, as beings possessed of consciousness and will, and communicating among themselves and with humans. For him, the fundamental consequences of this analogical and symbolic representation are twofold. On the one hand, religion, like science later on, presents itself as both a means and a reason for knowing and explaining reality, that is, to make sense of the chains of cause and effect that form the basic order of things. On the other hand, religion—because it represents these causes in human form, or more specifically as beings analogous yet superior to humans—presents itself immediately as a means of interaction with these ideal personages, which are human-like, and hence capable of understanding humans' calls and responding to them favorably.

For this reason, Godelier concludes, religious representation is inseparable from action (albeit imaginary) upon the world, whether it be through prayer, sacrifice, magic, or ritual. He suggests that religion is not only acting upon the world, but also "action upon itself," exemplified by the fact that all ritual and magical practice is accompanied by some restriction or some prohibition on the part of the person in charge or the general public. In that sense the religious act implies and triggers human action in order to communicate with these forces, to reach them and make them understand, and hopefully, to make them obey. The conceptualization of religion as a link between the humanization of nature and the naturalization of mankind therefore allows an analysis of both domains—in contrast to those concepts which separate them.

Godelier's interpretation opens a path towards understanding human relations with the supernatural in the Andes, but does not exhaust the dimensions of their articulation. The Andes, in effect stretching from the languid beaches of the Colombian and Venezuelan Caribbean to the frozen fjords of Tierra del Fuego, are a mountain chain extending 4500 miles and are among the highest mountains in the world. They were the birthplace of some of the most important civilizations of the Americas, beginning with Chavin de Huantar towards the end of the second millennium BC. The people of Chavin, like those of Tihuanaco, and Tawantinsuyu later on, linked themselves to these majestic peaks, regarding them as their place of origin and the natural home of the gods, whom they recognized

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through offerings including human sacrifices, the most famous being child "ice mummies" left by the Incas (Bernbaum 1990).

Andean conceptions of space were informed by the principle of dualism, the 2 counterpoised halves of *hanan* (upper) and *urin* (lower). At the same time, the world appeared in 3 integrated planes: *hanan pacha* (the world above), *kay pacha* (this world), and *urin pacha* (the world below). *Pachamama* was the divinity of the land, occupying the mountains and the underground, the provider of food. Facing *Pachamama*, in line with dualistic thinking, was the god of the world above, *Wiracocha*, the Andean creator. After the beginning of time, *Wiracocha* faded, his place taken by *Inti*, the sun, with the Inca being regarded as his son (Pease 1994). If the principal deities were *Pachamama* and *Wiracocha*, they were not the only ones, and many times they took on distinct regional names. Beyond this were many local gods, such as the *huacas*, a generic term for secondary deities as well as the sites of their cults (Zuidema 1964).

Origin myths

So much for the spatial dimension of Andean cosmologies; the temporal dimension of this mountain and human environment is conveyed in the Inca origin myths. Among the different versions of origin myths, the version offered by Juan de Betanzos in his *Suma y Narración de los Incas* (1551) appears to have been the most faithful to the original Quechua informants who recounted things from pre-Spanish times in Cuzco (MacCormack 1991, pp 108–110). In these stories, the creator was called *Contiti Wiracocha*, perceived as either an individual deity or group of deities. The people who lived in ancient times, when there was no light, worshipped another god. Then in Tihuanaco the creator *Contiti Wiracocha* created the sun and the day, the moon and stars, and turned the early inhabitants of earth to stone in retaliation for having offended him. From these stones, *Contiti Wiracocha* formed many types of people, among them lords, pregnant women, and babies in cradleboards, all sent by the other *wiracochas* to the caves, mountains, and rivers of Peru to populate them. He finished by sending off 2 other *wiracochas*, one to Condesuyo and the other to Andesuyo, while he made his way to Cuzco along the royal road. In Cuzco, *Contiti Wiracocha* created a prince, *Alcabicca*, signaling that later there would appear *orejones*, which is to say Incas. His work finished, he then made the trek to Puerto Viejo, in what is now northwestern Ecuador, to reunite with his people and disappear into the ocean.

Betanzos also informs us that before the Incas, Cuzco was a town with 30 small houses, ruled by *Alcabicca*. At some point there emerged from the cave of Pacaritambo 4 brothers with their sisters, who began to plant the fields near Guanacaure. One of the brothers turned 3 mountains into plains, but was imprisoned in the cave of Pacaritambo by his jealous siblings. The others moved on to Matagua, where they first saw the attractive valley of Cuzco. One of the brothers, *Ayaruchu*, remained on the peak of Guanacaure to speak with his father, the sun, who ordered that another brother, *Ayar Manco*, later known as *Manco Capac*, was to lead his siblings to populate the city of Cuzco. Meanwhile, *Manco Capac* chose a house site in Cuzco's center, which would later become the temple of the sun. In due course, *Manco Capac* died, and was replaced by his son who took the daughter of a neighboring lord as his wife.

Mountains and snow peaks, then, were the sacred places from which the founders of human society in the Andes emerged. They are at the same time central referents of a mythical identity that is in its way historical. Cult objects, furthermore, serve to honor the mythical tradition, existing to be asked for protection, and to be expected to reciprocate gifts with the wealth and bounty of the land. Abodes of Andean gods and spirits are many, including *apus, wamanis, aukis, achachilas, mallkus*, sacred paths crossed by the Inca trail, and even paths of perennial pilgrimage and transhumance marked by *apachetas*, or stone cairns. But the mountains were also, in a complementary way, the abode of the dead and their *huacas*, or "living shrines," a key point since both the rise and fall of the Inca Empire have been closely linked to the cult of ancestors. Yet one should add that myths and holy places which link deities with mountains are part of a tradition preceding the Incas; ultimately, the *Tawantinsuyo* lasted only 4 centuries within a much longer process.

Spiritual colonization and interaction

Along with the cult of ancestors, the Incas' specific inherited practices imposed constant demands that translated into a relentless drive for territorial expansion. Even though this process was legitimated by the state, and served as an important means of social advancement for distinguished warriors, it had serious limitations (Conrad and Demarest 1984). The recruitment of men in their most productive years for the imperial army deeply affected the economy, such that food surpluses were spent in their sustenance. The state did in fact seek various solutions to these problems. One of them was the abolition of the ancestor cult, attempted by one of the last Incas, Huascar, in hopes of reducing the drain on resources needed to maintain the growing number of *huacas*, or shrines of the dead. The rejection of this proposal on the part of the clan lineages of the dead resulted in Huascar's losing the support of Hurin Cusco, the half of the city that had

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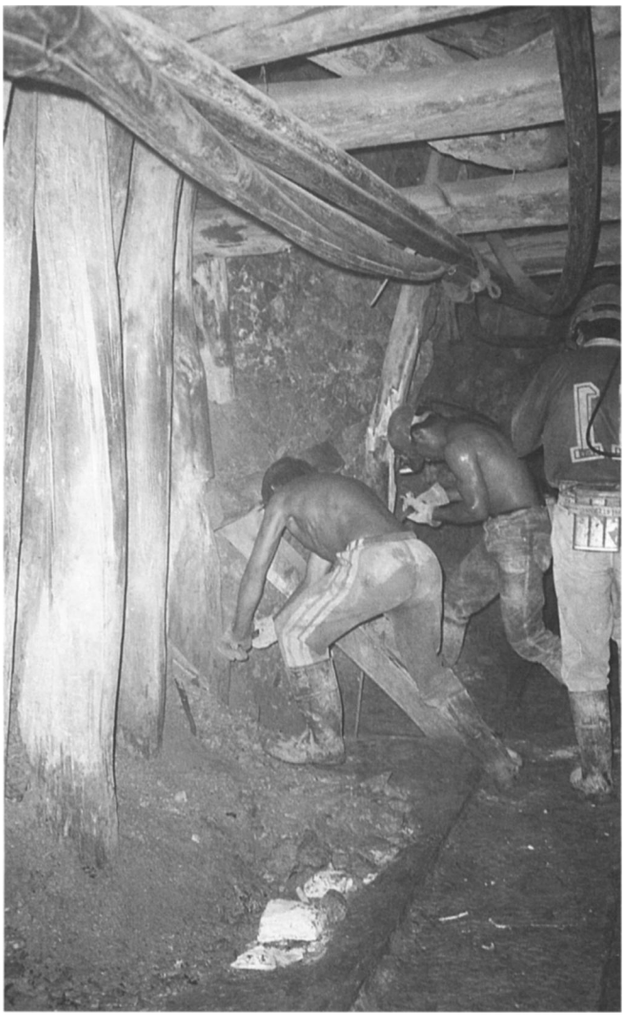
produced emperors since Inca Roca, and their subsequent attachment to Quito-born *Atawallpa,* Huascar's rival in a civil war unlike any previous one (Bonilla 2005). When the Spanish arrived in 1532, *Atawallpa* was winning, and Huascar was a captive.

It is well known that the arrival of the Spanish was the beginning of an unprecedented process of extraction. Elliott (1989, p 19) has calculated that, in the first century and a half of colonization, no less than 181 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver were taken from the mountains sacred to the local population. And his figures include only legal remissions of precious metals to Spain. Against this background one can easily imagine the impact of colonial extraction on native peoples. In Andean eyes, the Spanish were immediately associated with gold and silver, metals that had no monetary value before the conquest (Bakewell 1984). Andean amazement at the Spanish lust for gold was expressed eloquently in one paragraph of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's thousand-folio long letter to King Philip III in 1615. He reproduced the question *Atawallpa* was said to have posed to one of Pizarro's gunners: "Is it gold that you eat?" The Spanish reply was: "This gold we eat." Thus, in the native view, the first stage of global capital accumulation resulted from the violation of holy places, which required compensation for damage. Moreover, exploitation of the mines and the expropriation of their resources stopped encouraging resistance on the part of the Indians through the mediation of their deities.

FIGURE 3 Miners in Cerro Rico (4200 m), Potosí. Working conditions in Bolivian mines are barely tolerable, taking a huge toll on men's lives. Dust, heat, lack of air, noise, the sheer weight of the stones extracted for silver, tin, or lead, and very long working hours are made bearable only by chewing coca leaves. Yet mining is the only source of income for many families in the area. (Photo by Silvia Roth)



Yet the Spanish conquest of the Andes was not limited to the search for and control of riches and human subjects. It was also about the control of souls. This "spiritual conquest," or "colonization of the imaginary," to invoke the titles of 2 important books on the subject (Ricard 1933; Gruzinski 1988), was much more problematical than the Spanish hoped it would be, and its outcome remains the subject of controversy. Concepts such as "acculturation," "syncretism," and "adaptation and resistance" have been successively utilized to make sense of the collision and aftermath of these two distinct religious conceptions of the world. Their meeting produced, in the long term, the practices of the miners of Potosí and elsewhere, as well as important festivals such as Cusco's Corpus Christi, in colonial times and today (Dean 2002).

These festivals feature polysemic symbols and rites that combine, as a result of specific historical conjunctures, both Andean and Western traditions: Catholic saints with *huamanis,* Christian conceptions of good and evil reconfigured by the fact of oppression of indigenous peoples, *mesas,* or masses, for the payment of the land and mines, but whose Catholic referent scarcely hides the continuity of past rites (Lafaye 1974). This is the cultural context in which the *tíos* of Potosí and Oruro, and the *muquis* of central Peru, operate. Again, these are malignant forces, yet their roles seem to be reversed by means of ritual offerings, turning them into protectors of the miners' lives, and also guarantorŝ of their economic success within a framework of profoundly unequal exchange, through the exploitation of mineral resources and their inclusion in the productive process of their economies (Figure 3).

Religion and politics today

Having given a short outline of the processes of historical formation we can now turn to the modern situa-

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tion. In societies such as those in the Andes, religion and politics are entirely interlaced. It was Nash (1979) and Taussig (1980) who, in pioneering books, demonstrated the articulation of these mythical beliefs in the consciousness and political practices of Bolivian miners. For Nash, traditional Andean culture, and the cult of the Tío in the mines, were a means by which the miners fortified an already strong and spontaneous solidarity, their recognition that they needed one another in order to respond efficiently to the hazards of their trade. And that solidarity, cemented by collective complicity in the cult of the gods of the underworld, created the strongest platform from which to resist, and successfully reject, the demands of the so-called tin barons, and later public bureaucrats after nationalization in 1952.

Using the Marxist paradigm, Taussig (1980, p 227) asserts in his seminal study:

> With the conquest, Indian culture absorbed but also transformed Christian mythology. The image of the spirit of evil and the mythology of redemption were refashioned to give poetic expression to the needs of the oppressed. Christian symbols came to mediate the conflict between opposed civilizations and between conflicting ways of apprehending reality. With the advance of capitalist production, as in the mines today, the contested terrain has expanded to include the meaning of work and things promoted by the capitalist vision of the world, especially its fetishization of commodities and devitalization of persons. Against this mythic structure, the miners have developed their rites of production. These rites refashion the symbolism of commodity production so that a distinct form of poetic wisdom and political insight comes to bear. They bear testimony to a consciousness that creatively resists the reification that capitalism imposes, just as the miners' trade union and twentieth-century political history furnish ample proof of their socialist militancy. The miners' rites bear the legacy of tradition: a pre-established way of seeing the world that structures new experiences.

That is to say, mining activity is a scene for the transformation of a commodity's use values into exchange values, with the consequent fetishization of this commodity-money into the means by which the capitalist transformation of the sector is measured. The cult of the Tío, then, serves to translate the miners' resistance to alienation and exploitation by the mine owners.

Both Nash and Taussig recognized the centrality of Andean traditional culture as the base from which workers elaborated the mechanisms of resistance against their exploitation and alienation. The miners' cult of the Tío constructs an identity, fortifies a solidarity, and at the same time by its very ambiguity in representing good and evil protects them and serves as a powerful ally against outsiders. As this cult is anchored in the very depths of historical memory, it is no surprise that it still serves as one of the central vectors of the consciousness of the miners, who were only marginally more educated in political terms than the mass of Latin American workers. Or so it was at least until the 1985 economic stabilization Decree #21060, which unified official and unofficial currency exchange rates and led to an economic austerity program that quickly fired 21,000 of Bolivia's 27,000 state-employed miners. It is worth noting as well that the specific capitalist emergency of the Andean mining sector that began in the 1980s was accompanied by a violence similar to the many upheavals experienced in Victorian England (Thompson 1963), except that this story found no Dickens to bear witness. The analogy used by Taussig to capture this process, by alluding to commodity fetishism, is still pertinent, despite the fact that power relations in the mining sector today have been shaped by a radically different economic reality since 1985.

In fact, the influence of capitalist development in the Andes and the role of religion described by Taussig are neither linear nor homogenous. The *huacchilleros*, or herders of the central Andes, the miners of Bolivia, the many "artisan" blacksmiths and smelters, the muleskinners and porters, all managed through their struggles to impose conditions of labor compatible with their parallel condition as peasants, all the while maintaining their dignity and hope.

Final comments

For a long time, union leaders and political organizers of the traditional left were disturbed by the fact that miners' ritual practices were part of a political socialization taking place outside conventional channels. The impermeability of the miners' consciousness and their perception of the world vis-à-vis outside influences reflects the power that traditional Andean culture still maintains, permitting social actors like the miners to structure an effective consciousness of resistance that fits squarely within their culture's central parameters.

One Peruvian thinker who perceived this situation acutely was José Carlos Mariátegui. His unorthodox observations brought him the condemnation of the 3rd Communist International in Buenos Aires in 1929. Some years earlier he had written: "All the research of the contemporary intelligentsia on the world crisis leads to this unanimous conclusion: bourgeois civilization suffers from the lack of a mythic core, a faith, a hope, the lack of which is the expression of its material rupture… But man, as defined philosophically, is a metaphysical animal. He does not prosper without a metaphysical conception of life. Myth moves man in his-

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tory" (Quijano 1991, pp 9–13). Followed by generations of militants, Mariátegui maintained that in Peru the mobilizing myth requires a fusion with the Indian. "An indigenous revolutionary consciousness," he wrote in 1929, "will perhaps take time to form; but once the Indian has made the socialist idea his own, he will serve it with discipline, a tenacity and a force that few other members of the proletariat could possibly surpass" (Quijano 1991, p 227).

A second comment refers to the role of this traditional culture as a ramp leading to development and growth. It has been amply documented how these mechanisms of solidarity have served Andeans well in attenuating persistent crises (Bonilla 2005), whether in the creation of new forms of productive cooperation, the reduction of costs through socialization of multiple services, or the implementation of distribution mechanisms for goods and services that evade the market. Moreover, the recent and massive mobilizations of the indigenous populations of Ecuador and Bolivia have advanced a concept of development that is opposed to international bureaucracy, based on withholding and defending resources that are not easily renewed, and demands an equitable redistribution of the results of productive action. But in the case of the experience of the Bolivian miners with the Tío, their political activities are also expressions of a struggle for a type of development different from and opposed to the standard Western model so breathlessly proclaimed these days. They are a bet on a different development.

In our day, in the Andes as elsewhere, globalization and secularization seem to go together. The former is proclaimed as a general remedy to fight poverty and bring prosperity, whereas the latter is thought of as an alternative to tradition and inertia. In Latin America, such politics have produced very mixed results so far and have favored some people while worsening the material condition of the majority. Resistance against this process manifests itself in the strengthening of traditional convictions, in the defense of customary behavior, and in the development of mechanisms that make an appeal to group solidarity and try to withstand crises and helplessness. In such a situation, it is not astonishing to observe once again that doctrines such as "liberation theology" on the one hand, and a return to the *huacas* and the *tíos* on the other hand, strengthen expectations and make it possible to envisage a different world.

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